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**THE NEW JERSEY**  
**ITALIAN AND ITALIAN AMERICAN HERITAGE**  
**COMMISSION**



PILOT CURRICULUM PROGRAM 2004-2005

*Italian Heritage Curriculum: "The Universality of Italian Heritage"*

## Unit One: History & Society

### "Alternatives to the Venetian Spice Monopoly"

**Purpose:**

Students will be able to:

1. determine why the conquest of Constantinople at first benefited Venice, but eventually led to its demise as a major power.
2. assay why Spain and Portugal looked south and west instead of east to trade with the Orient.
3. predict why Italian captains would sail Western European ships to the New World.

**Key terms:**

Cartographer	<i>Latin &amp; Greek</i>	Maker of maps.
Monopoly	<i>Latin from Greek</i>	Exclusive control over a commercial activity.
Navigator	<i>Latin</i>	Charter and director of the course of a ship.
Orient	<i>Latin</i>	The East, commonly Asia.

**Lesson Theme**

In 1453, the Ottoman Turks finally defeated the last vestige of the Eastern Roman Empire, of which Constantinople was its capital (often referred to as the second Rome). There had been an overland spice-trading route from the Orient that passed through Constantinople and avoided a Venetian-Egyptian near-monopoly of the spice trade from the East. Once the Turks closed the Constantinople spice-route, the Egyptians imposed a 33% tariff on all Eastern trade. The Venetians still prospered through their virtual monopoly of the Egyptian spice trade, but other states in Europe paid much more for goods. The Portuguese and Spanish searched for other routes to obtain Oriental spices. Italian sailors, cartographers, and navigators, particularly those on Italy's west coast, like the Genoans, started to offer their considerable skills as seamen to seek a western route to the Indies. Cristoforo Colombo was the first Italian to cross the Atlantic, but others such as Giovanni Caboto (John Cabot), Giovanni da Verrazano, Amerigo Vespucci, and many regular sailors from Italy followed. This search for cheaper alternatives, often led by Italian seafarers, helped usher in the Age of Exploration, which led to the European interaction with the New World.

**Activities:**

- I. Explain the term "Monopoly" to the class.
- II. Have students look at a map of the Mediterranean region
  - a. Label Constantinople, Genoa, Venice, Egypt, Spain, and Portugal
- III. Give students the following scenario. "The Turks had captured Constantinople in 1453 and closed the overland spice-route from the Orient. The Venetians held a monopoly on all Oriental spice trade that went through Egypt. With Constantinople closed, the Egyptians placed a 33% tariff on spices going to Europe, knowing the Europeans had no other suppliers. Venice still had its monopoly on all Oriental spice going to European cities from Egypt. Typically, when monopolies exist and prices become too high, incentives emerge to seek alternative suppliers."
- IV. Inform students that most people did not want to travel west over the Atlantic. Most educated people believed the world was not flat, but many sailors were superstitious and afraid of the unknown waters to the west.
- V. Have students break up into five groups. Tell them they are sailors in Genoa, but that Venice has control of most of the financially rewarding trade in the Mediterranean; thus, they are out of work. They know that the cities of Europe are desperate for spices at reasonable rates. They have

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- probable customers, but they have to devise a way to meet the customers' needs.
- VI. Have each group come up with a way to get the spices. Tell each group to devise a structured plan, with at least seven steps to get spices to Europe from the (East) Indies.
- a. Show students the outline of the world map,
    - i. Tell them that the sailors would not know that the western hemisphere existed.
    - ii. The sailors did know that the world was round or at least curved.
  - b. Step one will be the problem: Getting spices to London, Antwerp, Amsterdam, Lübeck Hamburg, etc. from the East Indies.
  - c. The final step will be arriving in the European cities with the spices.
- VII. Have groups present each plan. Give them a thorough critique of whether their plan would be feasible.

## **Map of Mediterranean Hand-Out**

